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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S CURRENT THINKING ON WEST AFRICA

REF: PARIS 69

Classified By: Andrew Young, Political Counselor, reason 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The AQIM threat in Africa's Sahel is France's number one priority on the continent, and there are troubling signs that AQIM is trying to expand its area of operations to Nigeria and Senegal, according to the MFA's DAS for West Africa, Laurent Bigot. During a January 27 meeting with Africa-watcher, Bigot also noted France's concern with corruption and anti-democratic trends in Senegal; uncertainty about Nigeria managing a peaceful political transition; the delicate and "practical" steps needed to confirm Guinea's restoration of democracy; the likelihood that President Gbagbo wants to delay elections until October; and risk of political violence in Togo after President Faure assures his own reelection. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On January 27, French MFA DAS for West Africa, Laurent Bigot, asked to share with Africa-watcher the MFA's current views on developments in a number of West African countries. Bigot spent 10 days in Senegal at the end of December 2009, and will be visiting Cote d'Ivoire in mid-February. He had little positive assessment to share, but did highlight where the U.S. and France could work together.

MALI AND SAHEL SECURITY

13. (C) Bigot, as have other French officials, described the threat posed by al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Northern Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel as France's number one issue in Africa. French sources believe that AQIM is actively trying to expand its reach, and is apparently in direct contact with Nigerian extremist group Boko Haram, who might issue a communique in the coming days confirming an operational partnership between the two groups. Bigot also noted that French intelligence services believe AQIM is trying to carry out another operation in West Africa, likely a new kidnapping of western citizens and has, to that end, recently sent one or two teams to Senegal to assess possible targets. Bigot added that French officials are keen to continue to expand information-sharing with U.S. agencies in order to better coordinate support for African countries' anti-AQIM efforts.

SENEGAL

14. (C) Senegal remains very troubling, and France views President Wade's all-encompassing priority as retaining power and then assuring that his son, Karim, is able to take over. Wade has already requested that the ruling PDS party officially begin to support Karim so that he can become the mainstream leader and not just the head of the youth-oriented spinoff, "the Generation of Concrete." Bigot also believes another government reshuffle is in the offing, the results of

which will also support Karim's position. Likewise, Wade's recent moves to change the structure of local governments, effectively increasingly politicizing regional government, is clearly an effort to undercut the gains made by Senegal's opposition coalition during last year's local elections.

15. (C) Bigot finds credible reports that President Wade may try to manipulate Senegal's constitution in order to hold elections in late 2010 or early 2011, rather than in 2012 as scheduled. Wade likely realizes that neither he nor Karim could win in 2012, without massive fraud, which the country and international community could not abide. However, with the political opposition still fractured, and with Wade's skillful doling out of patronage monies and positions, Wade likely could win a rushed election. According to Bigot, former PM Idrissa Seck agrees with this scenario.

16. (C) Bigot explained that during his December 2009 visit to Senegal he met with the top GOS officials, senior opposition leaders, union officials, religious leaders, and French business people. Bigot was surprised by the unanimity of the opposition to Wade's rule. Nobody was willing to support Wade, or his son, remaining in power after 2012. Common complaints were Wade's misuse of public funds (for the Monument to the African Renaissance and other pet projects), his preference for opaque deals with China, Arab countries, and Iran, and especially, the significant rise in corruption -- with Karim Wade being singled out: "il mange beaucoup trop" (he eats too much). The French companies told Bigot that until two years ago corruption in Senegal was not too bad, but now it's "a matter of state policy." The French Consul General told Bigot that lately there has been a very

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significant increase in consular fraud, which is widely believed to be orchestrated by Karim and his cohorts. This includes providing diplomatic and official passports to those not qualified, as well as furnishing official travel documents for non-existent TDY missions.

17. (C) The IMF's recent, largely positive review of Senegal's public finances is also troubling, in Bigot's view. He said it does not reflect the reality of the country's fiscal mismanagement and corruption, and is likely the result of the IMF trying to gloss over its relationship with Senegal in light of the "Segura affair" in which the former IMF resrep departed Senegal with a valise full of money from President Wade. In Bigot's opinion, despite apparently informing his bosses of the incident and returning the money, Segura made a huge mistake in accepting the valise, and he never should have traveled with it. In the end, the IMF looks worse than Senegal and "Wade won the game," in Bigot's view.

18. (C) When asked about the situation in the restive Casamance region, Bigot said that Wade is likely realizing that his previous strategy for maintaining a basic level of security -- namely, to "send lots of envelopes stuffed with cash to strategic players" -- is no longer working. Therefore, perhaps Wade is willing to finally negotiate seriously. However, Bigot does not have a clear sense of what Wade's actual goals are for the Casamance.

19. (C) Bigot suggested that the U.S. and France coordinate on strong messages to President Wade so that he "doesn't go too far." We should be clear that "we hold him responsible for Senegal's democracy." We should also note that we are concerned about the possibility of violent social unrest, but that Wade can take positive steps to reverse this trend.

NIGERIA

110. (C) Turning to Nigeria, Bigot stated that the uncertainty surrounding President Yar'Adua's condition is worrying. Bigot said that he was not sure about Yar'Adua's current prognosis and asked if it were true that USG sources

were reporting that he had died or was in a coma. (Africa-watcher replied that he had not seen any such reports.) France is concerned enough about the possibility of a military coup launched to fill the political vacuum that senior French officials have informed Nigeria's general officers that they should remain in headquarter buildings. Bigot believes negotiations are taking place to allow Vice President Goodluck Jonathan to stay in power, as long as he does not run for President in 2011. Bigot added that Yar'Adua's wife, Turai, is clearly involved in the negotiations, but it was not clear what role she was playing.

Regarding the recent violence in Jos, Bigot claimed that it was not religious, but political and economic. He didn't see any connection between the recent violence in the north and the country's current political uncertainty.

GUINEA

¶11. (C) While acknowledging that there has been some positive progress in Guinea, a number of difficult hurdles remains. In Bigot's opinion, CNDD leader Dadis Camara was sent from Rabat to Ouagadougou at the insistence of Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaore because Compaore wanted to be "back in the center of the action" for Guinea's transition. Despite the Ouagadougou agreement, Sekouba Konate does not trust Compaore, mostly because Compaore signed a number of lucrative commercial agreements with Dadis prior to the September 28 violence. At this point, Konate, and France, believe it is still possible that Dadis could return to Guinea and try to take power, or that he could run for president in the next elections. Also, Bigot stated that PM Jean-Marie Dore will have a difficult time constituting a government that does not include some CNDD leaders, and he will likely have to gain, at a minimum, the tacit acceptance of Claude Pivi.

¶12. (C) France is not convinced that elections can be held in six months, and it would be a very negative dynamic if they were announced and then postponed. Bigot said that it "is important to be pragmatic" about elections. Suggesting that the timetable should note "as soon as possible," rather than focusing on a 6-month calendar, Bigot added that it is more realistic to think about elections in 10-12 months.

¶13. (C) Bigot hopes that the ICC will be "cautious" and not press for naming Dadis and Pivi. This could force Pivi to

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take immediate action as well as encourage Dadis to return to Guinea before he is named in an ICC indictment.

¶14. (SBU) As noted by FM Kouchner on January 28, Bigot stated that France is prepared to recommence military (and other) cooperation with Guinea as soon as the transition government is named.

COTE D'IVOIRE

¶15. (C) Bigot is "not as optimistic" about elections in Cote d'Ivoire as he was even a couple of weeks ago. He thinks it likely that Gbagbo will do his best to postpone the vote until October so that he can "finish his mandate," something that is apparently of increasing symbolic importance to Gbagbo. Electorally, the delay could also help Gbagbo since Bedie is increasingly viewed as "too old" to be president, and Ouattera appears, in Bigot's opinion, to no longer want to be president -- perhaps out of fear for his life, perhaps simply because he doesn't want the responsibility. Ouattera wants to run and remain the head of the RDR, but likely won't do what it takes to truly contend. However, should the elections be postponed until October, Bigot believes it is possible that other candidates could try to push their way into the field, mentioning Jean Louis Billon, head of the Ivorian Chamber of Commerce, and perhaps even PM Soro.

¶16. (C) When asked about France's willingness to maintain

operation Licorne for another ten months or more, Bigot reiterated that President Sarkozy said the French troops would stay until elections, and so they will.

TOGO

¶17. (C) Bigot said he was very surprised that Gilchrist Olympio did not file his paperwork for the presidential elections, and it was not yet clear why he decided to not run. Olympio's reputed back injury was not a sufficient reason, in Bigot's assessment. The fact that Olympio did not officially endorse the UFC's candidate, Secretary-General Jean Pierre Fabre, demonstrates a deep fracture in the party. With Olympio out of the race, Bigot believes the elections could be "more normal" with the Eyadema-Olympio family feud effectively removed from the campaign. That does not mean the elections will go smoothly. Bigot views Fabre as a hardliner who has already begun forming UFC militias. France remains very concerned about post election violence, since it is clear that President Faure Gnassingbe will assure by any means necessary that he is reelected.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) As with most of our Africa interlocutors, Bigot is very open with us. As noted in Reftel and previous reporting, it is clear from this and other recent meetings that France hopes to continue close consultation with the U.S. on countries and issues discussed. Bio note: Prior to his position as West Africa DAS, Bigot was the deputy to his predecessor Christine Fages. (The deputy position was abolished when Bigot became DAS.) He has served in Niger and also in out-of-ministry secondments as chief of staff to two prefets (Dordogne department and Corsica region). He joined the MFA in 1997 and speaks very good English. He has indicated that he spent part of his youth growing up in Nigeria.

¶19. (U) Conakry and Tripoli minimize considered.
RIVKIN